

Franciscans and the Power of Fish in the Seventeenth-Century Ireland

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Around 1617, an Irish Franciscan, Donatus Monaeus (Donagh Mooney or Donnchada Ó Maonaigh) sat down in Louvain and wrote a history of the Irish friars, their houses and their fortunes since Henry VIII's break with Rome. It is also a history of power relations, written by the ostensible losers. Food, especially fish, runs right through Mooney's history. This paper will explore the food story embedded in this 104-page Latin text which is usually known as *De Provincia Hiberniae*.

The Observant Franciscan movement in Ireland was fuelled by fish. Most of the new wealth and economic activity on the island in the 15th century was stimulated by changes in shoaling patterns. This fishy wealth provided patrons whose ability to support large new friaries in rural settings would have great consequences in the fracturing world born out of 16th and 17th century religious change. At the time of Mooney's writing the survival of the Franciscan mendicants ninety years after Henrician schism was, in a large part, due to the location of major friaries outside the reach of Crown control. During his time as provincial Mooney re-established communities even in urban areas such as Dublin. Rapidly growing numbers of friars meant a notable rise in questing by these professed beggars for foodstuffs. Franciscan mendicancy became so marked that it affronted both Dublin Castle and Catholic secular clergy alike.

Food, however, was not just a pragmatic matter for the followers of the *Poverello* of Assisi. Eating and fasting were at the very core of the sacramental, theological and rulebound lives of the friars. The *Regula Bullata* of 1223 not only enjoined fasting but also required Franciscans to eat whatever was set in front of them. This simultaneously providential and elastic understanding of the role of food in religious life was not primarily about nourishment but about the *raison d'être* of the Order — poverty. In both the Rule and in St. Bonaventure's *Legenda Major* (the official biography of Francis) food is always a means to the end of poverty. Food, both in its use and non-use, always points beyond itself: 'they were refreshed more by the gift of divine generosity than by the food they had received for their bodies' [LM, 550]. Francis said: 'bread is clearly angelic which holy poverty gathers from door-to-door, which is sought out of God's love and is given out of His love by the blessed prompting of the angels' [LM, 582]. Begging is transfigured into theophany. Abandonment to poverty would lead not only to abundance but to 'superabundance' as both Mooney and Bonaventure put it.

For Mooney the fates of Franciscanism and of Ireland itself are so inter-related as to be one. A page-long excursus

in his chronology (between the entry for 1603 and that for 1606) details what we might call the six woes of Ireland. First, while 16 years of warfare killed thousands of heretics, many of the antique nobility died in defence of 'faith and fatherland'. Second, Ireland was devastated, barren, burnt, wild beasts dominated the land and sky, fields were left uncultivated, hunger gave rise to rumours of cannibalism. Thirdly, the land was visited by a devastating plague after the peace. Fourth, there was a vicious persecution of the catholic faith and its priests. Fifth, a general proscription of the nobles who defended that faith. Finally, and worst of all, came the King's decision that the ancient rights of those who were raised 'in papismo' were nothing, and that those who were 'addicti' [debt-slaves] of the king's religion would be, 'carried over here and have the lands of others as divided by rope'. The end of the nobles brings plague, famine, disaster and heresy, straight out of a medieval Irish advice text. But he is also writing out of a Franciscan tradition in which the daily necessity for sustenance intertwines with the daily sacrifice of poverty. Daily bread, most frequently evoked in the *Legenda Major* under its minor form of crumbs, is at the heart of St. Francis' concerns — in the Host, in the Rule, in daily begging, in miraculous multiplications, in healings, in his very first sermon before the Pope. Mooney, steeped in the *Legenda* both in its full version, in its homiletic shortened version, as well as its related Divine Office, married this hagiography with his providential version of Irish Franciscan history. Here is a double gaze which is at once transnational and deeply local.

Mooney's text is based on a visitation or tour he carried out in the mid-1610s. It has been mined by historians and others as a gazetteer and source book. On a pragmatic level this work is a survey which was intended for use in recovery of friaries should what he calls 'meliora tempora', 'better times' should ever come but in its lyrical layers it is a hymn of praise to poverty as institutionalized in the Observant Franciscan movement. 'Superabundance' and 'excess of abundance' are the marks of a movement whose engine is radical poverty. This sense of excess is at its most exuberant in Mooney's description of fish and fishing. In his three favourite, most austere houses — Donegal, Meelick and Sherkin — even Francis' angelic begging is eclipsed by the propensity of these remote places, now hallowed by Franciscan presence, to provide unceasing and unailing supplies of seafood. On Sherkin Island, friars can cast lines even as they career around the cloister. In Meelick the excess of discards from shellfish, the crumbs of the shells as it were, make up the very mortar of the buildings which are

held together, as Mooney remarks, by Lady Poverty herself. Such provision of food in deserted, uncultivated places is the first miracle granted to Francis and his companions on their way home to Assisi after being granted approval of their way of life in Rome. Here with food, as throughout his text, Mooney collapses both chronology and distance to being the life of the founder and the vicissitudes of his 17th Irish followers into harmony.

De Provincia Hiberniae also contains two barely concealed narrative threads. The first was internal to the Franciscan *familia* itself — the rise of the Observant branch and its replacement of the conventual friars. The second was the dissolution of the convents of the order and their distribution to what he calls *Anglo-haeretici*, English heretics, a deliberate conflation of ethnicity and confession by the provincial of a religious order in the throes of creating an argument for an identity based on birth in Ireland and adherence to Rome. Both of these narrative threads are part picked out in food and fish. Mooney frequently praises the lands and waterways near friaries for their fecundity and ability to offer an abundance for the inhabitants. But when it came to fish, there was a crucial difference between Conventuals and Observants. The former group were not fully consecrated to poverty — they owned fish weirs and eel weirs but while these might be abundant, they were not superabundant. They were fruits of commerce, often a little distant from a friary. The Observant fish were at the friary, superabundant and offering themselves, fruits of poverty.

In Bonaventure's *Legenda* Francis chooses to pray in 'deserted and abandoned churches at night' [LM, 607-608]. There he is physically assaulted by, tussles with, and defeats demons and spirits who assault him physically. The Protestant possessors of former friaries such as Enniscorthy, New Ross and Drogheda are also pestered by nocturnal poltergeists but they are unable to defeat them, and are broken and bruised. They are not Francis nor are they his followers. If voluntary poverty leads to abundance, possession of old friary sites leads to a scarifying involuntary poverty. Business ventures fail, heirs are not apparent. In Drogheda, the new owner attempts some kitchen gardening, but all the vegetables are distorted into the shapes of limbs and body parts, quickly becoming objects of disgust and purveyors of ruin for the speculator. In Meelick and Galway the new owners realise that it is prudent to leave some pairs of friars on site, otherwise their trade in food and other stuffs will fail. Only poverty and its true practitioners can sustain these sites.

Water, the medium of fish, and also of hygiene, healing and transport soaks both *De Provincia* and *Legenda Major*. Francis creates many curative springs *ex nihilo*, good for both animal and human health. He also, on one of his many Christlike occasions, makes the sign of the cross over

water, turning it into healing wine. The Irish friars in Mooney's account - most especially his Franciscan antithesis of the friar-apostate Miler Mac Craith, Brian Mac Craith — also make many healing springs. In a nicely enculturated drink miracle dated to 1595, Fr. Maurice O'Hickey of Timoleague friary turns water into milk and so brings a dying local back to a long life of witnessing Franciscan sanctity. In both Umbria and Ireland, water blessed by Francis or blessed with his blessing, restores crops, ends droughts and heals the afflicted in an array of manners.

The Rule required friars to eat whatever their hosts placed before them. This is a major preoccupation in Bonaventure who explains: 'when he [Francis] went out among people, he conformed himself to his hosts in the food he ate because of the text of the Gospel (Luke 10, 7) But when he returned home, he kept strictly his sparse and rigid abstinence. Thus he was austere towards himself but considerate toward his neighbour' [LM, 561]. Later on, Francis combines presence at generous tables with questing on the very same evening, annoying even his ally the bishop of Ostia. The table becomes a place of prophecy, of witness and of action in the life of the Poverello. The same dynamic is transferred to Ireland in Mooney whose holy hero Brian Mac Craith explains poverty to the Earl of Kildare while seated in the place of honour beside the viceroy, and where friars' own deaths and the deaths of others far distant are prophesied in refectories and at meals.

Donatus Mooney's belief that the Franciscan Observants were especially 'unshaken' by the vicissitudes of religious shiftings under Ireland's Tudor rulers appeared to be borne out by the extent to which the friars helped conserve Catholicism until Rome began to reorganize the Irish church in earnest from the 1580s and 1590s onwards. Their mendicancy was an asset in an island marked by decades of continuous war, dislocation and vast transfers of lands. Mooney's account plays this reality out in a sustained reflection on poverty. The very pith and core of this poverty could be understood through food. By transferring the food themes explored by St. Francis' official biographer St. Bonaventure to Ireland Donatus Mooney vindicated his claim that his friars were the *organic* order for the island.

About the author

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